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EDC 102

4 November 2013

Diversity

As a child, I was surrounded by diversity, and as a result, never gave it much conscious thought. My parents consistently exposed me to a variety of people and experiences, which facilitated regular contact with different races, cultures and socioeconomic groups from a very early age. I had friends of every race, color and creed; we volunteered our time to the homeless and the elderly, and our house was home to countless foster children.

While these early experiences certainly shaped my overall perception regarding diversity and acceptance, I realize now that I was blissfully naïve to the more subtle, covert instances of inequity, racism or intolerance which surrounded me.

Yet my freshman year of college, I was repeatedly stung by a series of unabashed, irresponsible, insensitive displays of racism, perpetrated by a professor unto my fellow students. One instance was during a class discussion on an African American themed text we had been tasked to read for homework. During a lull in the discussion, the professor said, “Hey, you. You back there. What do you think about all of this?” The student he referenced, seated in the far back corner of the class, was the only black student in the room; he looked shocked and uncomfortable. The class fell silent. Gazes were averted. The professor pressed on, laughing, making light of his attempt at a joke.

This was one of many inappropriate occurrences I witnessed that semester. Although I knew then that the professors actions were inappropriate, thirteen years later, I have cultivated a deeper, more personal understanding of the causes and implications of his actions. As a white woman raising a Hispanic child, I’ve contemplated my place in guiding him toward a sense of cultural identity, and I’ve obsessed over the possibility of it being my child in that classroom. If presented with the unfortunate opportunity, what would I do differently today? More importantly, how will I prepare my son, or future students, to take a stand on their own behalf, or that of their peers?